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Global Education for Global Understanding: A Case of Finland

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the role of global understanding in Finnish geography education. A short overview of the changes of local and global themes in curricula is made before the analysis of the current framework curricula for the lower and secondary schools is reported. The ten-year long history of global education in the Finnish educational reports will be described after which the focus will be put in practice of teaching. Two geography teachers (two of the authors of this chapter) will tell about their views on how geography can enhance global understanding and link local and global dimensions together.

1 Introduction

Geography education in Finland has its roots in 'home region studies' that were regarded as a starting point for young students to gain knowledge of the world. This was especially important in the early decades of the 20th century when there was a need for the independent nation to construct its citizens' national identity. Identification to the nation was thought to be possible when strong attachment was first created with the local, everyday environments. Focus started to change in the 1970s when the system of comprehensive school was launched. Equal opportunities were offered for all the young people to gain free education for nine years, starting from the age of seven (Committee Report 1970). At that time, Finland was rapidly changing from an agrarian society to post-industrial and urbanised society where the need to increase interaction with other countries was the reality. In that context traditional ideas of home region studies as a starting point of teaching were considered to be old fashioned; instead, 'international education' was highlighted as a principle (Tani 2014). During that time, a clear distinction was made between 'us' and 'them' though; Finland was still culturally quite homogenous and therefore it was easy to think that internationalism would mean studies of different nations; national identity of Finland was thought to be solid and common for all the citizens of the country.

Societal changes were thus reflected on the framework curricula of the comprehensive school: first by including international education to the cross-curricular themes; the idea of the themes was that all the school subjects should apply them in their own contexts, and later, when immigration started to increase

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in the 1990s, by including 'multicultural education' among issues that were planned to be taught as integrated in all the school subjects (Cantell & Cantell 2009; Holm & Zilliacus 2009). 'Home region studies', 'intercultural education' and 'multicultural education' can all be seen as landmarks towards global understanding in their ways to highlight the importance of person's own identification to her/his own community and the increasing need and willingness to get to know others and appreciate their possibly different ways of living.

Global understanding needs not only understanding and appreciating other cultures and societies but it also needs interest in environmental issues and responsible actions so that the sustainable future could be reached. In the Finnish context, this aim has been implemented in national framework curricula from the 1980s when the concept of 'environmental education' was included among the basic aims of education (National Board of Education 1985; see also National Board of Education 1994). In the 2004 curriculum it was replaced by the aim of 'responsibility for the environment, well-being and a sustainable future' (National Board of Education 2004). The main idea was to include environmental and sustainability education to all school subjects as one of the crosscutting themes, not as a separate entity that would be taught detached from the other contents of the courses. This principle, regardless of its beautiful idea, has not been realised as well as it was meant to. Several reasons for this can be identified: first, when these cross-curricular themes and educational aims were described in opening chapters of the national framework curricula and not included in more detailed descriptions of separate school subjects and their specific aims, these broader principles were easily 'forgotten' from the subjects and their teaching. Second, environmental issues have normally been attached to biology and geography teaching, which has made it easy to think that teachers of these subjects would take care of environmental issues. Cross-curricular integration has thus not been as efficient as it was meant to be. Third, even if teachers of other school subjects would be interested in environmental and sustainability education, they often have limited knowledge of these issues and therefore feel unconfident of their expertise.

In this chapter the current framework curricula for the Finnish secondary curricula will be analysed in order to find out how the ideas of global understanding have been interpreted. This analysis will be followed by describing the materials that have been produced by the National Board of Education, Ministry of Education and Culture and several non-governmental organisations to support teachers in their work of global education. The chapter then turns into practice by giving some examples of global education in classrooms of two geography teachers in teacher training schools of the University of Helsinki.

2 Status of Geography in Secondary Education

Finnish national framework curricula are renewed approximately every tenth year. The present versions were launched recently; for the nine-year comprehensive school (including six years of primary and three years of lower secondary education) in 2014 and for the general upper secondary school in 2015. Geography is taught together with biology, chemistry, physics and health

education in primary school in the subject called 'Environmental Studies', while in lower and upper secondary schools it is taught as an individual subject.

Since the implementation of cross-curricular themes has not been as successful as it was meant to be, stronger links between overall educational aims, cross-curricular themes and school subjects were decided to be produced for the renewed curricula. The objectives have now been described in more detail and in every subject, the subject-specific aims are connected to 'meaning, values, and attitudes', 'skills for investigation and action', and 'knowledge and understanding'. In the new curriculum for lower secondary schools (Finnish National Board of Education 2014) students' role as active agents in learning process has been highlighted. Gaining knowledge that has earlier been considered to be crucial in education is still been regarded as important, but increasing attention has been paid to the objectives to 'learn to learn', skills and competencies as well as values. Objectives of geography education are expressed under three categories: 1) geographical knowledge and understanding; 2) geographical skills, and 3) objectives related to attitudes and values. Six key content areas are named in the new curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education 2014, 661–662):

- The map and regions of the world
- The current, changing world
- Basic conditions for life on Earth
- Changing landscapes and living environments
- People and cultures on Earth
- A sustainable way of living and sustainable use of natural resources

The 2014 curriculum for the comprehensive school sees students' role as active and responsible citizens important and to enhance that, their abilities to understand complex phenomena should be supported in geography education. Using different information sources is regarded as important in order to be able to construct overall understanding of the big issues. Critical evaluation of the relevance and reliability of information are considered to be crucial in this process.

The status of geography in lower secondary schools remained basically the same as it was in earlier curricula even when its contents moved from the emphasis of the regional geography towards more global aspects. In general upper secondary school, the change was more remarkable: geography lost one of its two mandatory courses. In the new curriculum of 2015, geography has thus one obligatory course 'The Changing World' and three voluntary courses (physical geography, human geography, and the course of geomeia and geographical inquiry). The main aim of the mandatory course is to examine the changing world and its regional problems. Current news from different parts of the world is followed during the course and some natural and environmental hazards and risks of humankind are studied (National Board of Education 2015). The course is not only studying risks but it attempts to highlight opportunities for positive development and ways that are needed for controlling, preparing for, foreseeing and adapting to the risks.

‘Eco-social sustainability’, ‘circular economy’ and ‘global development issues’ are defined as essential viewpoints for geography education. The skills to use a wide range of geographical media are also emphasized in the curriculum.

The aims of the new curricula sound thus promising for enhancing global understanding in geography. But how are these aims implemented in practice? What kinds of challenges do teachers see in applying these ideas of curricula in their everyday work? These are the questions that will be answered in the following. Before letting teachers tell about their experiences, a short overview of the supporting materials produced by different bodies (both governmental institutions and non-governmental organisations) will be presented.

3 Global Education to Enhance Global Understanding

‘Global education’ as a term came into the Finnish educational reports in 2007. In the first report (Kaivola & Mélen-Paaso 2007) based on the project called *Education for Global Responsibility*, global education was defined as the global dimension of citizenship education. It consisted of five sub-themes: 1) development education; 2) human rights education; 3) education for sustainable development; 4) education for peace and conflict prevention and 5) intercultural education. The final report of the project (Lampinen & Mélen-Paaso 2009) explored key concepts of global responsibility in the Finnish and international frameworks while it also described the state of global education in Finland at that time.

As the sub-themes of global education listed above indicate, the emphasis was placed on cultural and social aspects of citizenship education even when environmental issues were also included in the theme of education for sustainable development. Cantell (2011) has shown how the ideas of global education share many of the educational aims presented in geography curricula.

Kepa (an organisation having expertise in global development) acts as a platform for Finnish civil society organisations that focus on development cooperation, global education and advocacy work. It coordinates a global education network of more than 150 organisations (Kepa s.a.). To get an overall idea of the NGOs participating in the global education work in Finland, they can be listed based on their major interests as follows:

- Human rights and equality education
- Development education
- Cultural education
- Peace and security education
- Communications and media education
- Environmental education

At the website of the Global Education network it is stated that “the methods of Global Education vary from advocacy campaigns to school visits, from culture projects to e-learning events. It is conducted for people from all ages and

backgrounds: schools, workplaces, free time activities and culture life.” (globalikasvatus.fi/node/930).

While the NGOs have a leading role in enhancing global education in Finland, also some governmental organisations have an important role in supporting global education. For example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs offers teaching materials for lower and upper secondary schools on development cooperation (Maailma 2030, s.a.). Finnish National Board of Education has designed supporting materials for teachers, students and school principals as well as for municipalities to enhance international approaches to education in comprehensive and upper secondary schools. It also offers online materials for global education.

We are writing here about global education even when the topic of the book should be in global understanding. Are there some major differences between these concepts? Or are they basically the same? How do the geography teachers see the role of global understanding in their work? These issues will be explored next when two of the authors, Elina and Outi, will describe their thoughts of global understanding in the context of their work as geography teachers.

4 Global Education in Practice

In order to gain a better view on global education in Finnish schools this chapter now turns into practice. Elina and Outi work at the teacher training schools of the University of Helsinki. They both teach geography at lower and upper secondary levels. The first author, Sirpa, was interested in hearing about their views on global education in the context of geography teaching. Questions and answers were changed by emails, mostly in Finnish and then the excerpts used in this text were translated into English. Following questions were discussed:

- Based on your opinion, what are the most important issues of ‘global education’ and ‘global understanding’?
- How can geography education enhance global understanding?
- What do you think about the current geography curricula (for lower and upper secondary schools) in relation to global understanding?
- How can local and global dimensions be linked in teaching?
- Are there any challenges in applying the ideas of global understanding in geography teaching? If yes, please describe them.

In her answers Elina highlighted the importance of understanding of planetary phenomena as a basis for global understanding; Earth’s rotation and its influence on living conditions in different parts of the world understandable and thus offered an important starting point for studying global phenomena. She also mentioned the importance of paying attention to current issues in teaching: studying global warming and refugee “crisis” could enhance and deepen students’ global understanding. Both Elina and Outi regarded questions of sustainability, development issues and intercultural education as essential. Outi explained this:

Development education helps students understand reasons behind uneven development; sustainable development is important for understanding the world as an entity and for

seeing the consequences of for example of the usage of fossil fuels. Intercultural education is important because it enhances awareness and understanding of different cultures at the same time when it helps in constructing students' own identity and their tolerance and empathy to other cultures.

Geography was considered to be an excellent subject in enhancing global understanding: it connects the local issues to global phenomena, natural issues to human-made elements and thus works as a bridge between natural and social sciences. This process was not straightforward though; it needed time from the students, as Elina explained:

Global understanding is built throughout the school years and courses. It is like the outcome of whole geography teaching. Sometimes students need to be patient to 'connect the dots', because understanding issues, those reasons and consequences, is a slow process.

The current geography curricula for both lower and upper secondary curricula were discussed in the light of global understanding. The change in the lower secondary school was seen positive; the old curriculum that was more tightly based on regional geography did not offer clear ways to link local and global issues together; in the new curriculum of 2014 opportunities to construct these links were made more obvious:

Elina: The approach to the themes is primarily global; teaching can then be 'zoomed in' to some regional examples. This is now different from the old curriculum in which Europe in the eight grade and Finland in the ninth grade were first studied from regional point of view after which the studied themes could possibly be linked to the global level.

Outi: Understanding the world is now easier thanks to the new curriculum for lower secondary school; two of the six key content areas are straightly linked to the main issues enhancing global understanding; they are 'People and cultures on Earth' and 'A sustainable way of living and sustainable use of natural resources'.

While the change at the lower secondary curriculum enhanced the global-local linkage, the situation at the upper secondary level was regarded as problematic. The shortage of time was the major challenge, as Outi explained:

At the upper secondary school, during the only mandatory course there is not enough time to get deeper understanding of the world.

The three optional courses of the upper secondary curriculum included many themes that could strengthen students' capabilities to link global and local phenomena and thus enhance their geographical thinking, but the problem was the fact that these courses were chosen relatively seldom. Outi mentioned how the aims and contents described in the curriculum gave a positive image of the situation but because these optional courses were not popular among the students, global understanding could not really be developed as well as intended in the plans.

One of the questions investigated the ways to bring local and global dimensions together in teaching. Even when Elina highlighted the global aspects as starting points she also pointed out how many of the global risks were so big that they

could easily cause feelings of disempowerment and despair among the students. That is why when these issues were studied solutions to the risks were sought from the local level. Students' opportunities to act towards solutions should be supported so that they would not be left alone with the big issues.

Limited amount of time in teaching and the risk of increasing students' feelings of lack of ways to have a say in global issues were the most obvious challenges that were mentioned. Outi mentioned how knowledge-based teaching could enhance students' awareness of the global issues but how it did not necessarily lead to their growth to become active and responsible global citizens. She raised the concern of increasing their despair and the need of enhancing their empowerment. Elina highlighted the role of knowledge in teaching issues that were strongly present in the current media; the refugee crisis in Europe was one of the issues that had caused a stir in the media; geography teaching could work as a 'counter-discussion' against the mediated opinions. She also mentioned how students' fears and prior ideas could be taken into account in geography classrooms; the hate discussion had to be excluded categorically though.

Both teachers were well aware of the risk that geography education was facing in global education: while the big issues and cultural diversities were brought in front in teaching, there was always the possibility that the good intentions were causing more harm than positive outcome. Elina gave some examples of these:

Another issue that is a challenge is different cultures in geography teaching. While trying to tear down stereotypes geography teaching still builds them. Also the "third world" is often described as unnatural and backward when compared to the "first world". Comparing issues is important to underline the inequality that needs to be changed. However, also the attitudes might change in a way that was not the purpose.

There were many interesting examples of teaching methods mentioned in the answers. Role-plays and other activating methods that were enhancing students' capabilities to widen their views and to step into other person's shoes were considered to be effective methods. Discussions were also regarded as valuable, as were some documentary films that showed the everyday life of people from other parts of the world; these could make the students think about their own role as consumers and the ethics of global markets, just to give an example. Some of these materials and methods could also raise objection against inequality in production chains and against uneven distribution of material and immaterial well being in the world.

Conclusion

In this chapter our aim was to give an overview of the status of global understanding in the Finnish context. As the described content of the curricula and the materials available indicate, geography education has many opportunities in enhancing young people's global understanding. There were also some challenges that were identified though: the limited time that geography has in the Finnish curriculum especially at the upper secondary level; the complex character of many global issues that could easily cause feelings of fear and despair; the practices in classrooms that could make the construction of local-global links

difficult, to name just a few. Despite these serious problems, geography education has also some major strengths that makes it one the most powerful school subjects in enhancing global understanding: the essence of discipline containing both natural and social-scientific aspects; having the long history of linking general geography into regional geographic aspects; and last but not least, having a strong tradition to attach teaching into students' everyday experiences. All these elements together make geography one of the core subjects in increasing students' opportunities to find their ways to act as responsible citizens in the contemporary world – locally but also globally.

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